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SUBJECT: Another Journalist Arrested in Niger

Ref: 06 Niamey 741

11. (U) SUMMARY. On October 29, Nigerien journalist Alzouma Zakari was arrested by Nigerien Judicial Police after alleging inappropriate involvement by Minister of Interior Albade Abouba in a government contract to provide airline transportation during the 2008 Hajj. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Zakari is a journalist and director of publication for the pro-opposition independent weekly "Opinions." He was arrested under Niger's criminal libel statutes after a complaint was filed by Minister Abouba in response to a recently-published article.

13. (U) The article alleged that Abouba, while acting as interim prime minister during an out-of-country trip by PM Seini Oumarou, canceled a competitively bid contract with Sahel Airlines to transport pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the 2008 Hajj, and awarded the contract to Arik, a newly formed company whose owner, Moussa Dan Foulani, reportedly has strong ties to Nigerien President Mamadou Tandja.

14. (SBU) Sources also report that First Lady Laraba Tandja is a shareholder in Arik.

15. (U) The GON received intense criticism for the management of last year's Hajj after hundreds of Nigerien pilgrims were delayed in departing, then stranded in Saudi Arabia for weeks awaiting return transportation.

16. (U) In a decision late last week, a Nigerien court stripped the contract from Arik, and re-awarded it to Sahel Airlines. Flights are scheduled to begin this week.

17. (U) Zakari's hearing was scheduled for November 3, 2008, but was continued until November 11, 2008. He remains imprisoned pending his hearing.

18. (U) Alzouma has run afoul of GON officials previously. In 2006 his former newspaper "L'Opinion" was permanently shuttered by Niger's media regulatory body, the Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), on grounds of having published "injurious and defamatory statements" directed against President Tandja and his family, incitation to revolt, and "immoral offense" (reftel). One week after the closure of "L'Opinion," Zakari resumed publishing via his "new" newspaper "Opinions."

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